



Sermon Text Ruth 1:11-21

Contextualized in the story of former refugee Joseph Lewis

The Rev. Rodger C. Prois, Bishop, Western Iowa Synod, ELCA

We have two stories to consider that seem more dissimilar than similar; however, there are commonalities that we can explore. The dissimilarity seems to be evident in the historical differences: famine as opposed to power-motivated tribal war, cultural variations, and the assumption by Naomi that God was against her. Joseph, on the other hand, uses no God language. I feel the similarities are greater.

Ruth and Joseph become immigrants against their will, and the expectations that these young people have for content lives are disrupted, if not destroyed. Their personal commitment to a family unit is foundational and transcends the negative forces that intrude from the outside. In that familial relationship, service and sacrifice overcome adversity and strengthen the bonds of parent and child (albeit adopted child in Ruth's case). Conditions in their countries of origin are equally deplorable, although one story is about naturally occurring famine and the other is of human causation.

The commonality of the desperate situations makes it easy to slip into thoughts of the pseudo-scripture my mother would occasionally use: "There but by the grace of God, go I." That statement, with all its bad theology, would deny that God was with Naomi as she assumes the calamity that has befallen her is a direct work of God. So, too, it assumes that God was not with Joseph or his mother as she was tortured, or as they were forced to flee in the middle of the night, or as they suffered in affliction, poverty and homelessness. If God was not with them, then we can disassociate from the stories, because we are people who walk with God and are not like them at all. An understanding of a Theology

of the Cross allows us to see Christ suffering along with Naomi, Ruth, and Joseph, to the extent that Christ's suffering overcomes the death that was so ominous in these stories. They are then allowed the freedom to move into the future with new opportunities and rebuilt expectations, as God continues to show us, even if in lesser ways.

I was reminded of the plight of Joseph during my visit to Liberia in 2008, not long after peace had been achieved. I heard many stories of atrocity and horror that fit into the category of "you can't make this stuff up." After repeatedly hearing heart-wrenching tales, it became apparent that suffering has become part of the human experience in developing countries and is often exacerbated by prevailing conditions or human neglect. An exploration of Theodicy (the defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil, would fit into the narrative of both Naomi/Ruth and Joseph.

One of the primary causes of the Liberian civil war was the conflict between indigenous tribes those who were descendants of freed slaves brought to Africa from the U.S. The establishment of Liberia in 1847 is an example of how U.S. colonization failed to respect the cultures of those who were already living in the region. Americans assumed that it would be easier for freed slaves to live in Africa than in the U.S. It is evident that our own country – either then or now – needs to have a more Ruth-like attitude: one that celebrates the difference of cultures and is moved to adopt the foreign culture. Instead, our forced enculturation has led to

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Lutheran Immigration
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REFUGEE SUNDAY

SERMON NOTES

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the polarization of our society and has had detrimental effects.

An additional route for proclamation within our faith community is to explore those who become refugees. Further into the Ruth narrative, Boaz takes Ruth into his care and assures her safety and wellbeing. Joseph Lewis

encounters a pastor who recognized his needs and “provides a great deal of support and encouragement.” As a leader of a faith community, that pastor not only helped Joseph, but also modeled behavior that reflected God’s desire of what it could be like in the kingdom.